DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 482 405 CS 512 536

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TITLE	The Teaching of Phonics. ERIC Research Summary.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY	Institute of Education Sciences (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	ERS-030023
PUB DATE	2003-12-00
NOTE	6p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0028
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English and Communication, 2805 E. 10th St., #140, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698. Web site: http://reading.indiana.edu.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- ERIC Publications (071) -- Reference Materials - Bibliographies (131)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary Education; Literature Reviews; *Phonemic Awareness; *Phonics; Reading Achievement; Reading Improvement; *Reading Instruction
IDENTIFIERS	Explicit Instruction

ABSTRACT

This topical bibliography and commentary provides an overview of current thinking on the role of phonics in reading instruction. It discusses the value of phonics, phonics and phonemic awareness, the need for explicit instruction, principles in phonics instruction, and recommended instructional procedures. It concludes that findings from research reveals that phonemic awareness training will enhance children's auditory skills in segmenting and blending unfamiliar words as well as improve their reading achievement. Contains 9 references and links to 3 Internet resources. (RS)

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The Teaching of Phonics.

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The Teaching of Phonics

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Introduction

The following summaries provide an overview of current thinking on the role of phonics in the reading instruction. Although older studies tend to focus on phonics itself, more recent ones emphasize *phonemic awareness* and stress that the study of phonics should be integrated into a broader approach emphasizing the ability to blend individual sounds into words and to segment words into their individual components. Therefore, phonemic awareness is discussed to some extent in order to show how phonics fits into this broader approach.

The Value of Phonics

Phonics is a method of teaching reading and spelling which stresses symbols-sound relationships, and this method is especially important for beginning reading instruction (Albert, 1994; Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, & Willows, 2001; National Reading Panel, 2000). Phonics helps learners match the letters of the alphabet to the already known speech sounds. Albert (1995) also argues that phonics is important because it stresses *how* instead of *what*. The student learns a skill: how to convert individual letters into spoken language.

Phonics and Phonemic Awareness

The more recent articles stress that phonics is only the starting point. Knowledge of individual letter-sounds is of value only when incorporated into the larger picture represented by phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness, defined by Griffith and Olson (1992), as "the ability to examine language independently of meaning and to manipulate its component sounds. And because phonemes are not discrete units, phonemic awareness requires the ability to attend to a sound in the context of the other sounds in the word" (p. 516).

Spector (1995) cautions against assuming that the teaching of phonics automatically leads to phonemic awareness. Although phonics programs do emphasize regular letter-sound patterns, they do not always provide direct instruction in sound blending and phoneme segmentation. The author states:

> In some programs, phonics is taught through "word families" (e.g., *mat*, *fat*, *bat*; *hip*, *tip*, *lip*). Sounds of single letters are intentionally not introduced. Although many children achieve insight into the alphabetic principle in such a program (just as they do in whole-word programs), there is evidence that others will not develop phonemic awareness from this type of instruction. (p. 40-41)

The Need for Explicit Instruction

Grossen (1997) indicates that "the best predictor in K or 1st grade of a future reading difficulty in grade 3 is performance on a combination of measures of phonemic awareness, rapid naming of letters, numbers, and objects, and print awareness" (p. 7). She goes on to elaborate that direct instruction offers the best way for children learning to read.

> Explicit instruction in how segmentation and blending are involved in the reading process was superior to instruction that did not explicitly teach the children to apply phonemic awareness in reading. Kindergarten children with explicit instruction in phonemic awareness did better than a group of first graders who had no instruction, indicating that this crucial pre-skill for reading can be taught at least by age five and is not developmental. (p. 8)

Baumann and Duffy (1997) are primarily concerned with literature-based programs, multicultural learning and literacy development, etc. Even so, they briefly mention phonics and offer very general suggestions for including phonics instruction in the elementary-school reading program:

1. Phonics instruction is one important component of a reading program, but should not be the focus of the program. Reading aloud to children, guiding children to read text themselves, and encouraging students to read and write independently and with one another are also essential parts of the reading instructional program.
2. Phonics can be taught effectively in a number of ways.
3. Phonics can be taught in literature-based reading instructional programs.
4. Phonics should be taught explicitly and in conjunction with meaning reading and writing experiences (18).

Of all the authors, Spector (1995) is most emphatic about the need for explicit instruction and state "[a]lthough phonemic awareness does not always come naturally, with instruction children can acquire explicit knowledge of the structural and phonological features of spoken language" (40).

Principles in Phonics Instruction

Because children initially learn to use their language in order to get meaning and convey messages, they rarely consider the individual sounds within the words they use. Teachers must help children realize that "phonemes are the units encoded by the letters of the alphabetic languages used in most of the modern world, the raw material of reading and writing." (p. 37)

Teachers must also keep in mind that "the insight that words are composed of smaller units (i.e., phonemes) may be difficult for some children to grasp because phonemes are very abstract units of language. . . . Additionally, there is the problem of producing a phoneme in isolation. Phonemes are not discrete units" (Griffith and Olson, 1992, p. 516).

An effective way to avoid or correct these problems is to make use of books that help children "play" with the language and become aware of the things that can be done with letters and the sounds they represent. Yopp (1995) proposes that the best way to help children learn to segment and manipulate speech sounds is to provide them "with language-rich environments in which attention is often turned to language itself by means of word play in stories, songs, and games" (538).

Yopp (1995) also offers an extensive annotated bibliography of read-aloud books that encourage children to play with language (539-42). Her list includes only books in which "play with language is explicit and is a critical, dominant feature of the books so that children are encouraged to shift their focus from the message of the text to the language that is used to communicate the message" (538). She suggests that the books be used in the following ways:

- Read and reread the story
- Comment on the language use
- Encourage prediction
- Examine language use
- Create additional verses or make another version of the story

Although such books should not be read to the exclusion of other materials, the value of "playing with language" is clear. Children are not only able to quickly respond to the form of the language, they are also able to grasp the content of the text (Yopp, 1995).

Recommended Instructional Procedures

Albert (1994) asserts that the teaching of phonics should begin with the simple and regular forms and then move to the more complicated, irregulars. In many of the primary classrooms, phonics instruction usually begins with the more regular consonants, which may produce an extra grunt when pronounced individually (buh, tuh). This problem is resolved as soon as the short vowels are taught (*ab, eb, ib, ob, ub; ac, ec, ic*). These short vowels are taught first because they appear in about 2/3 of all English words. Then children can use letters or blocks to build three-letter (CVC) words such as *cat* or *get*. This helps children realize that letters represent sounds that are arranged left to right. Then the following items are introduced:

- Consonant digraphs used in CVC words, with the first or last consonant sound represented by a digraph: *ship, chop, mash, bath, sing.*
- Additional consonants ("blends") added and sounded out in three-letter words: *lot-blot; rag-brag; lip-slip.*

> At this point longer words can be sounded out, paying particular attention to the stressed syllable: *trumpet, umbrella, dragon, hundred,* etc.
>
> Long vowels are easier to pronounce, being the same as the name of the letter in the alphabet. The long vowel is signaled by the addition of a second vowel which may itself be silent: *coat, tree, pie, rain,* etc. (p. 3-4).

Children can begin to read sentences and stories before the phonics program is completed if they are taught to recognize a few function words that do not conform to familiar spelling patterns. Furthermore, adults can read while the child watches the book, and bedtime stories can be memorized by children who later look at the book and recite what they remember.

Students can also be taught the elements of phonics by starting with the core of a word pattern and building a series of words by adding onsets to rimes. For words built on the letter *e*, for example, the teacher asks students what letters would be added to make the words *me, he, we,* and *she*. Words containing a vowel-consonant pattern would be presented as a unit (*-at, -et,* or *ight*, for example). "If phonics elements are taught in natural clusters, then students will be more likely to recognize pronounceable word parts in difficult words" (485).

Word building helps students use phonic elements to decode difficult words. "For instance, after being taught the *-at* pattern, a student having difficulty decoding the word *pat* is asked to see if there is any part of the word s/he can say. If necessary, the teacher might cover up the *p* so that the student can focus on *at*" (487).

Although Spector (1995) is concerned with phonemic awareness training rather than phonics *per se*, her recommendations for instruction show how phonics can be incorporated:

- At the preschool level, engage children in activities that direct their attention to the sounds in words.
- Teach students to segment and to blend.
- Combine training in segmentation and blending with instruction in letter-sound relationships.
- Teach segmentation and blending as complementary processes.
- Systematically sequence examples when teaching segmentation and blending.
- Teach for transfer to novel tasks and contexts.
- Teach teachers the rationale underlying phonemic awareness training (41-46).

Conclusion

Findings from research reveal that phonemic awareness training will enhance children's auditory skills in segmenting and blending unfamiliar words. In addition, it helps improve their reading achievement. It is therefore important that educators incorporated phonics into their reading curriculum when working with beginning readers.

Web Sites

Phonics Online
http://reading.indiana.edu/phonics/

National Reading Panel's Teaching Children To Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction
http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/smallbook.htm

Phonics Instruction
http://reading.indiana.edu/ieo/bibs/phonics.html

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